



School writing practices, writing development and academic writing – how can they be combined in a coherent and effective schooling path?*

José Brandão Carvalho

Research Center in Education – University of Minho – Portugal

(jabrandao@ie.uminho.pt)

* This work is funded by CIEd – Research Centre on Education, projects UID/CED/1661/2013 and UID/CED/1661/2016, Institute of Education, University of Minho, through national funds of FCT/MCTES-PT.



Universidade do Minho
Instituto de Educação
Centro de Investigação em Educação



Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia



REPÚBLICA
PORTUGUESA



Higher education – a specific context of language use

- Reading and writing are institutive elements of HE as a context of human activity
- Learning is largely a matter of language, a translation of experience into knowledge
- The specificity of academic discourse and academic genres stems from:
 - ✓ the nature and purposes of educational activities mediated by them: knowledge transmission, knowledge acquisition, knowledge elaboration and knowledge expression functions
 - ✓ the specific nature of the various knowledge fields - each one involves particular contents and the correspondent particular forms of translating them into language
 - ✓ the referencing and citation styles that vary according to scientific communities



Higher education – a specific context of language use

Reading and writing academic texts involve, therefore, not only generic reading and writing skills, but also specific skills, the ability to adapt to the specific demands of the context and follow the norms and conventions accepted by a scientific community, a kind of "tribe" that has defined a specific form to refer to the aspects of the world under their observation and research (Creme & Lea, 2000).



Students' difficulties in the use of academic language:

Many HE students have difficulties in the use of academic discourse, what has often serious consequences and prevents their academic success

Such difficulties affect language uses implied in different aspects of the students' performances:

- ✓ accessing and reading source texts
- ✓ knowledge elaboration
- ✓ knowledge expression



Students' difficulties in the use of academic language

Accessing and reading source texts (note-taking) – problems identified:

- ✓ selection of relevant information
- ✓ organization of the notes
- ✓ conveying in their own words information retrieved from the source texts

Students' notes are often a mere reproduction of selected parts of the texts they read



Students' difficulties in the use of academic language

Knowledge reorganization and elaboration processes – problems identified:

- ✓ the detection of logic and hierarchical links and relationships involving various elements
- ✓ the synthesis of ideas and data retrieved from different sources

Problems arise when students are asked to draw concept maps or synthesize



Students' difficulties in the use of academic language

Knowledge expression – problems identified:

- ✓ structuring information and configuring it in an appropriate genre and register
- ✓ conveying in their own words information gathered in texts previously read (what can be seen as a cause of plagiarism)
- ✓ referencing and quoting the source texts according to the conventions of academic writing



Causes of the students' difficulties in the use of academic language

- ✓ The complexity and novelty of literacy practices in HE
- ✓ Reading and writing practices in language disciplines
- ✓ The gap between language used at school and language used in students' contexts outside school
- ✓ New technologies, new communication processes, new modes in knowledge configuration



The complexity and novelty of literacy practices in higher education

Elementary and Secondary Education:

Textbook analysis (How is language implied in learning activities?):

- ✓ predominance of knowledge reproduction tasks and the use of writing to reproduce information displayed in those textbooks

Inquiring teachers (How are reading and writing used to enhance their students' learning?):

- ✓ predominance of knowledge reproduction tasks (copying information written on the board or projected on a screen; space filling exercises; registering the class summary)
- ✓ more complex tasks that imply higher cognitive activity in order to transform or elaborate knowledge (note taking; summarizing texts; synthesizing information retrieved from different sources; drawing concept maps; writing reports) are much rarer



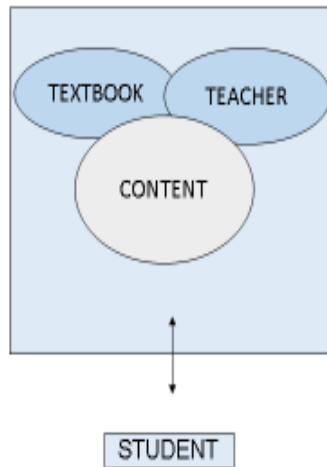
Universidade do Minho
Instituto de Educação
Centro de Investigação em Educação



The complexity and novelty of literacy practices in higher education

Elementary and Secondary Education:

Elementary and Secondary School



Teachers and textbooks are the two main, and often coincident, knowledge sources. The students are not considered knowledge producers but just recipients, a last stage of a knowledge transmission process, being requested to express, in tests or exams, what they have been taught.

At elementary and secondary levels, students write mostly to reproduce knowledge and that happens mainly in evaluation settings, in which success is rather dependent on the fidelity of such reproduction.



Universidade do Minho
Instituto de Educação
Centro de Investigação em Educação



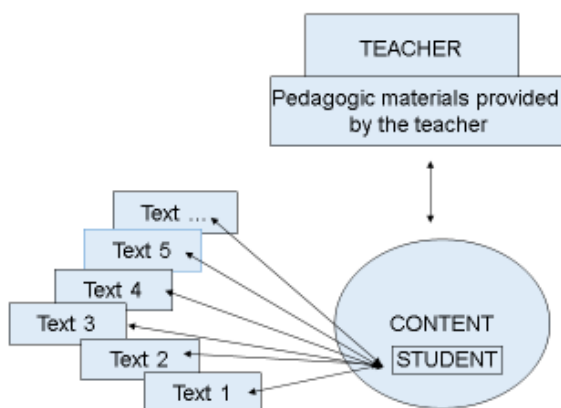
REPÚBLICA
PORTUGUESA

The complexity and novelty of literacy practices in higher education

Higher Education:

Higher Education implies new and more complex uses of language that demand distancing and decentering, the use of writing as a thinking tool and an instrument of knowledge construction and not in a predominantly functional and expressive way as they were used to do in lower school level.

Higher Education



Students are expected to appropriate and reconfigure knowledge in their own way, as the result of a process in which they interact with multiple and often divergent sources of information shaped in diverse genres.



Reading and Writing Practices in Language Disciplines

Reading

- ✓ mainly focused on poetry and narrative literary texts, devaluing other text genres implied in academic and professional contexts

Writing

- ✓ tends to perpetuate less advanced skills, instead of enhancing more advanced and complex competences
- ✓ *writer-based* writing, *knowledge telling* practices still prevail over *reader-based* writing, *knowledge transforming* activities (Flower, 1979; Bereirter and Scadamalia, 1987)

Language disciplines don't promote important literacy skills that students will need in order to participate in different social contexts, including the academic context



The gap between language used at school and language used in students' contexts outside school

Increasing influx into the university of people belonging to social groups who previously did not go much further than the first stages of school attendance

- ✓ students of higher social classes are familiar with elaborated and written uses of language, which do not differ much from the languages used at school to encode and communicate knowledge
- ✓ students from lower social groups, who, in their daily lives, are mainly acquainted with less complex and oral uses of language have difficulties in dealing with more elaborated codes



The gap between language used at school and language used in students' contexts outside school

- horizontal discourses vs vertical discourses
- restricted codes vs elaborated codes (Bernstein, 1999, 2000)
- vernacular varieties vs specialized varieties of language (Gee, 2004)

Attending school does not necessarily provide the mastery of elaborated, vertical codes to those students from lower social groups, who are used to restricted codes and bring their horizontal discourses into school. Many of those students still have that handicap when they access higher education.



New technologies, new communication processes, new modes in knowledge configuration

New communication contexts and means origin new genres and knowledge transmission processes have been changing radically, with an increasing use of other semiotic resources, rather than verbal oral or written language, to configure, encode and convey information.

This affects one's access to knowledge and may also the way this knowledge is processed and structured at a cognitive level.

Does a change in the way knowledge is conveyed and codified have implications in the shape knowledge assumes?

We may then wonder whether knowledge accessed through images would have an essentially iconic structure, as opposed to knowledge accessed through words, especially through written texts, which would have a verbal structure, implying a greater degree of explicitness and a distance from the categories of our experience (Halliday, 1989).



Universidade do Minho
Instituto de Educação
Centro de Investigação em Educação



New technologies, new communication processes, new modes in knowledge configuration

Writing has been associated to more elaborated ways of thinking, as it involves discursive patterns that facilitate the organization of the ideas and the expression of their relationships, enabling the full expression of definitions, assumptions and premises and the explanation of formal logic rules.

Written language may therefore be seen as a powerful instrument in the construction of abstract and coherent theories that explain the reality (Applebee, 1984; Olson, 1977).

While communication and knowledge construction processes are increasingly involving different non-verbal modes, other than words, knowledge expression for evaluation at school is still and almost dependent on the use of written words in rather complex textual genres.

As we go further in schooling, and especially in higher education, some changes occur in this aspect, as far as “monomodal” written texts progressively become the main and almost exclusive source of information.



Literacy enhancement in higher education

Two opposing conceptions of literacy:

- ✓ literacy as a set of generic skills that may be put into practice whenever they are necessary, independently from the context where language uses take place
- ✓ a context dependent vision of literacy that implies specific uses of language framed in appropriate text genres

A conception of literacy as a set of generic skills may still be predominant in higher education. literacy is mainly enhanced in writing centers that promote the acquisition of generic language skills and provide a set of guidelines that students are advised to follow step by step in order to cope with the demands of their academic activity

[Henderson and Hirst (2006), based on the analysis of the web pages of several universities]



Universidade do Minho
Instituto de Educação
Centro de Investigação em Educação

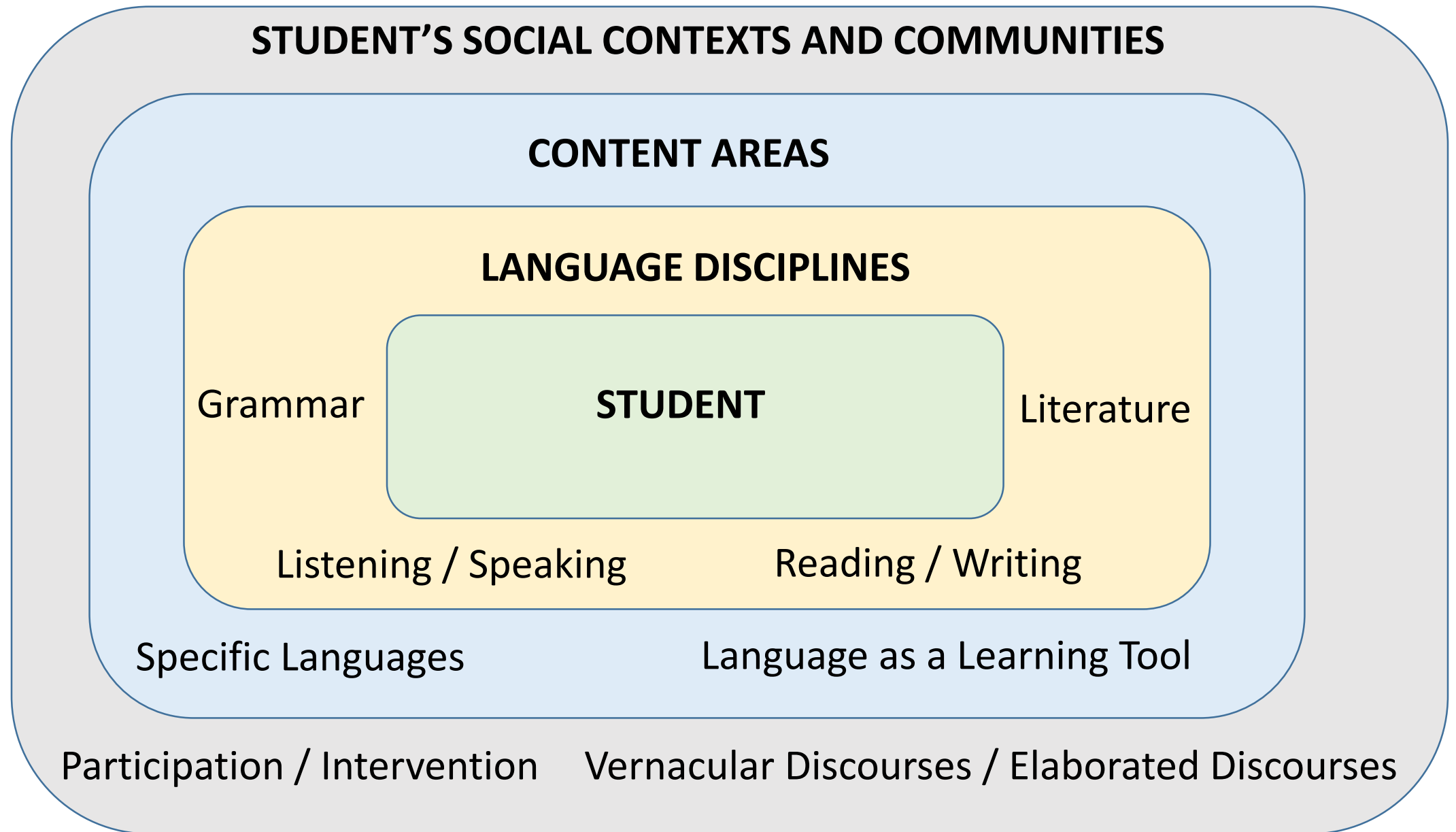


Towards an extensive and comprehensive model of (academic) literacy enhancement

Any discussion about academic literacy and the enhancement of students' reading and writing skills in academic contexts should not be confined to higher education but placed within the broader longitudinal scope of the whole students' career from elementary school to university. In addition, it should consider not only academic uses of language but any aspect related to language acquisition and the development of language skills in and outside school

In that broader longitudinal perspective, the promotion of literacy skills should take four dimensions into account:

- ✓ the student as an individual
- ✓ language disciplines
- ✓ other disciplines (content areas)
- ✓ school in relation with the social contexts and communities students come from





Universidade do Minho
Instituto de Educação
Centro de Investigação em Educação



Thank You



Universidade do Minho
Instituto de Educação
Centro de Investigação em Educação



This work is funded by CIEd – Research Centre on Education, UID/CED/01661/, Institute of Education, University of Minho, through national funds of FCT/MCTES-PT.